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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the dynamics of Paulo Freire's "true perception" and the importance of language awareness, and even style, to that "interdependence" which makes possible the perception and transformation of reality. Freire calls for a critical intervention to transform reality, and because this intervention simultaneously incorporates subjective and objective experience, it is necessarily an awareness of language. Several concepts from British critical linguistics, "gap filling" and "inferencing," are helpful in understanding and employing liberatory critical interventions in advanced and regular composition classes. In Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1968), the critical intervention is the activity that brings forth consciousness: a subject is born when its object is changed. Critical linguistics, as Lester Faigley (1992) argues, has been better than most perspectives at facilitating an appreciation of an ambiguous, double sense of agency, an interdependence of actor and acted upon. The first step in a modern tradition of stylistic analysis is the perception of a "dominant feature" in the text. In the critical linguistics classroom, the instructor aims to induce an awareness of style by giving students the purposefully vague direction to "identify 'THE' outstanding feature" in an excerpt of their own choosing. Then, the instructor asks the students to find a gap in the text and write a detailed "ghost chapter" to fill it. Finally, inferencing goes beyond gap filling: it examines the zone of "background intuition" that Freire mentions--it calls on the set of assumptions and expectations framed in common sense. (Contains 17 references.) (TB)

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Liberatory Teaching and Radical Stylistics: Gap-Filling, Framing and Inferencing in an Advanced Composition Course

Speaking of "the dialectical relation between the subjective and the objective," Paulo Freire focusses upon an "interdependence . . . without which it is impossible to resolve the oppressor-oppressed contradiction. To achieve this goal," he elaborates, "the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality. A mere perception of reality not followed by this critical intervention will not lead to a transformation of objective reality--precisely because it is not a true perception" (37).

I want to discuss today the dynamics of what Freire calls "true perception," and the importance of language awareness, and even style, to that "interdependence" which makes possible the perception and transformation of reality. Because it simultaneously incorporates subjective and objective experience, the critical intervention described by Freire is necessarily a critical awareness of language, I will argue. I will explain how several concepts from British critical linguistics (or more exactly radical stylistics), "gap-filling" and "inferencing," can help us understand and employ "liberatory" critical interventions in advanced and regular composition teaching.

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the critical intervention is the activity which brings forth consciousness: a subject is born

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when its object is changed. Subjectivity then, that enduringly interesting thing in modern philosophy and contemporary literary theory, changes its object which changes it: "consciousness and the world are simultaneous" (69). Freire describes this event phenomenologically, on page 70, with the help of Husserl. A critical intervention is a shift in the periphery of awareness, an interpretive move: when the figure begins to incorporate its ground, then it is that a zone of "background intuition" is admitted into consciousness. "That which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications (if indeed it was perceived at all) begins to 'stand out,' assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge."

"Using linguistics to solve the problems of rhetoric," Kenneth Burke once said, "is like trying to pack twenty people into one telephone booth" (Newsletter 4). For a long time, as everyone knows, Rhetoric and Composition has been at odds with language study. But recently we are beginning to see titles such as "Linguistics for Writers" again, and "Enabling Student Growth through Language Awareness." Critical linguistics, as Lester Faigley reminds us in his Fragments of Rationality (chapter 3) has been better than most perspectives at facilitating an appreciation of an ambiguous, doubled sense of agency--an interdependence of "actor/acted upon"--in "subject" (see Fowler, and Pope 46-9). The kind of "intervention" described by Freire as the always radical (re)birth of the subject can also be defined with radical stylistics as a phenomenological event: a

moment of gap-filling that makes possible the "common sense" of everyday communicative life, and then a more active, conscious and durational "inferencing" that challenges ideological assumptions contained in everyday reality, thereby stirring or activating the subject to see something differently and say something new. With a critical awareness of language, conceived as a form of action-upon-the-world which is to be perceived in textual cues, namely "dominant features," gaps, inferencing, and frames of (p)reference, students can "begin to single out elements from their 'background awareness' and to reflect upon them," in Freire's terms. Attending to the ways that language structures perceptions and transforms reality, students begin to realize that "[t]hese elements are now objects of men's [sic] consideration, and, as such, objects of their action and cognition" (70).

Dominant Features

The first step in a modern tradition of stylistic analysis (first developed by Leo Spitzer and then adapted by a generation of linguistic critics), is the perception of a "dominant linguistic feature" in a text. In the critical linguistic classroom we would aim to induce an awareness of style ("Look AT rather than THROUGH language," as Richard Lanham enjoins writers), by giving students the purposefully vague instructions to "identify THE outstanding feature" in an excerpt of their own choosing. "No standard procedure," as Lanham writes, "no check list of questions for every style; you take an outstanding

feature and see where it leads." This is a bit disingenuous of Lanham (as a consideration of contemporary developments in stylistics would bear out). No one starts wholly from scratch; in class, we do work together to understand several basic terms from language study: subject, verb, object, agent/agency, nominalization, active style/noun style. Using Joseph Williams' Style in its entirety, and then selections from Richard Lanham's Analyzing Prose and Revising Prose, and Walter Nash's "A Little Grammar" from his English Usage, we put together an ad hoc collection of terms for a very gentle, just barely formal lexicon of descriptors for stylistic effect.

Example #1:

ATIONS
If we meet and I say "Hi,"
That's a salutation.
If you ask me how I feel,
That's consideration.
If we stop and talk awhile,
That's a conversation.
If we understand each other,
That's communication.
If we argue, scream and fight,
That's an altercation.
If later we apologize,
That's reconciliation.
If we help each other home,
That's cooperation.
And all these ations added up
Make civilization.

This is a page from a children's book--a poem entitled "Ations." The dominant linguistic feature is nominalization. The student who brought this poem to class (and discussed it on an overhead projector) pointed out that the rhyming made it list-like; that and the pronouns stand out. She wondered what the

picture at the bottom of the page did to reinforce or distract from "the message." When we asked her what that message was, she said "the learning of manners." We will return to this poem later when discussing "inferencing."

Gap-Filling

After a dominant feature is identified we ask students to go further and identify a gap in the text being analyzed, or in an advertisement that contains some text along with imagery. Students in this class would eventually write a detailed "ghost chapter" that fills a perceptible gap in a common text (John Gilgun's novel, Music I Never Dreamed Of, about a gay man coming of age in working class Boston in the 1950s), after which they then identify the dominant feature in that text by "inferencing" a parallel or different or alternate story, their "ghost chapter" (Robert Scholes' term, from Umberto Eco).

There is a cline or continuum rather than a hard and fast difference between "gap-filling" and "inferencing" (for "cline" see Carter and Nash, 41-9, 244). Gap-filling is automatic, almost a reflex, at one end of the cline. It is the effective condition for coherence, as Norman Fairclough explains, and it applies to syntactic relationships within a text as well as to that referential relationship between statement and world we call "fit" or "sense" [82]). "It's cold today" spoken by my colleague in the doorway of my office calls forth my assumption that this person is talking 1) about the weather 2) "outdoors." To fill in

a gap in a text is to provide the implicit background assumptions which that text relies upon for recognizable, coherent sense. "My car almost didn't start," she then tells me, and I fill in the missing link: cold weather affects the way that cars start. Gap-filling, in this case the supplying of "a bridging assumption" (Brown and Yule 257), is "connections which we make as interpreters of texts; they are not made by the text itself, [b]ut in order to make them, we have to draw upon . . . 'background assumptions and expectations'" (78). Similarly, a new friend of mine recently MISread some cues when she filled a gap in my kitchen discourse: stirring a pan of spaghetti sauce on the stove, I told her that it was made with venison. Immediately she assumed that as an eater of deer meat I was also a hunter of deer, and therefore also (and here's the BIG gap) a fellow member of the NRA who shared with her an abhorrence of the assault rifle ban in last year's crime bill. I begged to disagree, which I had to do because bridging or background assumptions are implicit, as Fairclough explains; they "chain together successive parts of texts by supplying 'missing links' between explicit propositions, which the reader/hearer supplies automatically . . ." (61), and sometimes faultily.

Connections that a reader/hearer provides automatically in order to accommodate the "literal" meaning or "sense" of a text or utterance, by drawing upon background assumptions and expectations . . . which are or have been "framed" in common sense ways. Frames, as Kenneth Burke defined them in the 1930s

in Attitudes toward History, are practical paradigms. "A group of textual elements act as cues for a particular frame, and the frame provides a place for each textualized detail within a coherent whole," writes Fairclough (88). By responding to cues such as gaps, readers actively maintain paradigms of "common sense." I make sense of my colleague's comment on the weather and her car, for instance, by first completing it and then supplying a missing link, which I do by framing her statements as an opening turn in a conversation, the actual subject of which has yet to be announced.

Example 6]

Here is an interesting example of gap filling and framing: a poster advertising clothing made by the German company FUCT.

FUCT

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This is from a skateboarding magazine. The frames are several: first, of course, the Jaws movie posters, but here reversed or inverted, in a kind of postmodern or hip fashion: the woman (originally Jacqueline Bissett) rises from the deep. ONE has the teeth of the shark. The ad is presented in vivid colors of Red, White and Blue. In class we noted that after a point, this ad resists further framing and that this itself--this resistance to "sense"--is to be framed. We have to get used to products that don't announce themselves: the brand name is what's being advertised.

Inferencing

"Inferencing" in the classroom informed by critical linguistics is the bringing forth into the light of analysis that zone of "background intuition" Freire mentions and that we have called the set of assumptions and expectations framed in common sense. "Inferencing" takes place toward the other end of the cline from "gap filling," and it is what we hope will actually stimulate a student's recognition that "[t]hese elements are now objects of men's [sic] consideration, and, as such, objects of their action and cognition" (Freire 70).

Inferencing goes beyond gap filling: it is not a reader's response to the text's or addressor's preferred reading, which is what gap-filling is--the filling in of missing links to accommodate literal sense. "[T]exts may have formal missing

links," write Brown and Yule, "But it is readers and hearers who make inferences. Identifying missing links is not the same as identifying inferences" (240).

Example #3

Here we return to the children's poem "ATIONZ." The student filled in the gap in her children's poem "Ations": by graffito: "Nominalize" penned in front of "ATIONZ." Further framing that we discussed in class included these points: the statements are "true" i.e. uttered by someone who has the authority to 1) define situations and 2) abstract from the active processes (of saying "Hi" and talking or communicating, understanding, fighting, etc.). Here we have a nominalized descriptor of state: the speaker has made actions into nouns, and owns the power of naming (see Williams 43-4). And this points to the ideological role of frames of common sense, about which see Fairclough and Pope.

A text will open up some possibilities and offer to close down some possibilities. The reader gets to infer, as Pope explains in a particularly interesting recent treatment of "inferencing" (95-100). After our work with magazine ads and short texts, identifying dominant features and then filling gaps, we move toward the full-fledged "ghost chapter." "Inferencing" is achieved in round robin discussions wherein the class as a whole group brainstorms and discusses the "origins" of individual stories and ghost chapters. We think and talk quickly about where the ghost chapters "come from," listing the commonplaces or

"base units" of cultural competence that constitute the material content of the ghost chapters. We find and discuss "items which routinely collocate as members of the same semantic field" (Pope 7).

These terms are part of an approach to teaching which attempts to facilitate the bringing to consciousness of "members' resources" (Fairclough) or "unconscious intuition" ("traces of internalized cultural competence" [Pope 6]) in re-writing. "Cultural competence" or "unconscious intuition" are those things Freire discusses as "[t]hat which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications" (70). This is the material with which discourse awareness (Robert Con Davis' term for conscientização) works. We would concentrate our teaching methods upon exercises and activities that utilizes changes in awareness of style as critical intervention, using these terms, "dominant feature," gap-filling and inferencing (for a "ghost chapter") from critical linguistics or radical stylistics.

Rob Pope's "textual interventions" present ways of manoeuvering this "shift" by asking students to re-situate their own point-of-view in relation to way the text "desires itself to be read": parallel, counter, and alternate readings. "Discourse awareness" attends the realisation that every text is always already intervened in; that every text hides its origins and contradictions; that every text excludes as well as includes multiple points of view. Getting students to (re)write all kinds / / texts is the way to recognize this basic feature of

textuality, according to Pope, Scholes and other adherents of Textual Intervention and Power. With textual intervention, a zone of "background intuition" is admitted into consciousness, as Freire puts it. "That which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications (if indeed it was perceived at all) begins to 'stand out,' assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge." With "dominant features," "gap-filling," "frame" and "inferencing" we have "discourse awareness" then, described as a Freirean and critical linguistic/radical stylistic critical intervention.

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